

A Hedonist's guide to...

Istanbul

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■ Beyoğlu

Beyoğlu has always been the racier, modern and outré counterpart to the fading, stately and traditional grandeur of Sultanahmet. The area of Galata, just over the Golden Horn, was even in the days of Byzantium the home of foreign workers and merchants. On Galata Bridge the celebrated 19th-century Italian travel writer Edmondo de Amicis observed the parade of people who made up the Ottoman world – Albanians, Armenians, Africans, Jews, Tartars and Turks – and called them ‘a changing mosaic of races and religions, that is composed and scattered continually with a rapidity that the eye can scarcely follow’.

In late Ottoman times the area of Pera, north of Galata, took shape, where ambitious Europeans set up hotels, notably the Pera Palace, and embassies such as Charles Barry’s neoclassical British Consulate. It was here that electricity, telephony and the general trappings of modernity crash-landed into the hidebound Ottoman world. Their allure proved irresistible and in the mid-19th century the sultans implicitly acknowledged the shift of power, abandoned the Topkapı and built a succession of palaces along the nearby Bosphorus shore. Beyoğlu’s great artery, the Grand Rue de Pera (renamed İstiklal Caddesi in the early days of the Turkish Republic), was then a parade of European culture and manners, while in the backstreets a more louche and bohemian atmosphere reigned, fuelled by a concoction of artists, dancers, prostitutes, pimps, writers and spies. When people wax lyrical about the cosmopolitan charms of old Constantinople, it is late-19th-century and early- to mid-20th-century Pera that is at the forefront of their minds, with the melancholy relics of Old Stamboul forming a picturesque backdrop.

The area retained that character up until the 1950s, when an upsurge in Turkish nationalism convinced most minorities to leave. That’s now distant history and Beyoğlu is increasingly home to a kaleidoscope of nations, from Greek students and American writers to Iraqi immigrants and Nigerian businessmen. İstiklal Caddesi is now the city’s Oxford Street or Boulevard Haussmann, the beautiful 19th-century façades of its buildings dotted by hoardings and neon lights. Off its length run streets that are home to innumerable and wonderful cafés, bars, restaurants, music venues and clubs, many open until the early hours of the morning.

Asmalımescit, westwards off the bottom end of İstiklal, is a particular hotspot that has benefited from artist-led gentrification, with some of the best restaurants in town sitting beside a selection of cool bars and the city’s top dance and music club, Babylon, round the corner. Similarly, the neighbouring areas of Çukurcuma and Cihangir, on the other side of İstiklal, are riding high on a property price boom thanks to the creative types who have brought them credibility. Here the bars and restaurants are particularly fashionable, nodal points of an exclusive local social scene. Further north up İstiklal, Çiçek Pasajı, one of the many attractive passages that run off the main thoroughfare, is filled with smart waiters dying to lure you into their admittedly charmingly-appointed restaurants. Better, however, to avoid their touristy slickness and turn the corner to experience the rough ‘n’ ready attractions of the fish market and its adjacent stretch of *meyhanes* (taverns), Nevzade Sokak, both overflowing with the exuberant energy of street life. At its northern conclusion İstiklal finally empties out into the large and largely unappealing expanse of Taksim Square, a suitably symbolic separation, perhaps, between the many joys of Beyoğlu and the business district beyond.



rooms, an expansive lobby, bar and a rooftop restaurant with outstanding views of Sultanahmet and the Bosphorus, plus professional levels of service, the Richmond is a high-quality, if slightly characterless accommodation option. Crucially, however, it's the only hotel on the entire length of İstiklal Caddesi, the pedestrianised artery of Beyoğlu. Located towards İstiklal's southern end, the Richmond is only a short walk away from many of Beyoğlu's hotspots, including the *meyhane*-packed Asmalı Mescit district, which is just over the road. It's also close to Galata, where you can hop in a cab for the short ride to the Old City: ideal for visitors planning to split their time between sightseeing and experiencing Istanbul's more contemporary pleasures.

Style 5, Atmosphere 6, Location 8

Sumahan on the Water (top)
 Kuleli Caddesi 51, Çengelköy
 Tel: 00 90 216 422 8000
www.sumahan.com
 Rates: €175–325



Opened in May 2005, Sumahan on the Water is a fantastically stylish renovation of an old building on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. The Sumahan was formerly a 19th-century Ottoman distillery that made *raki*, eventually purchased by the present owner's grandfather. Consequently, the hotel has the kind of spaciousness and cool aesthetic common to converted industrial buildings in London and New York but rare in Istanbul. The renovation is superb and the 20 design rooms each have lovely Bosphorus views, modern fireplaces, fashionable furniture and

all entertainment and communication mod-cons. There are 13 very spacious suites; a number of them are duplexes boasting their own petite terrace gardens where you can sit on the lawn and enjoy the vista. Downstairs is Kordon, an excellent fish restaurant belonging to the same owner. As with Ajia, the location could be either a dream or a hassle. Though the hotel's private launch will whisk you across the Bosphorus to Kabataş on the European side in 15 minutes, or you can hop in a cab into town – a 30-minute ride – from the hotel's front door.

Style 8, Atmosphere 7, Location 6

Swissôtel Istanbul (bottom)
 – The Bosphorus
 Bayıldım Caddesi 2, Maçka
 Tel: 00 90 212 326 1100
www.swissotel.com/istanbul
 Rates: €230–360

Swissôtel celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2011 but it's still scooping up awards for luxury and service, if not cutting-edge design. This big-brand establishment is also a hotel of choice for low-key potentates and visiting royalty – the more blingtastic of sovereigns prefer the Çırağan Palace or the Four Seasons. Swissôtel is located just up from the water on a wooded hilltop, and many of its 500 five-star rooms boast truly magnificent skyline views over the Bosphorus. Amenities include 14 different restaurants, Turkish baths, spas, saunas, fitness centres, an indoor pool, tennis courts, a jogging path (extremely rare in the city), etc. Be aware that this enviable list of comforts is housed in a luxuriously anonymous

sleep...

litical intellectuals and is apparently full of lefties, the kind of people who know how to talk. Unfortunately, ignorance of Turkish may leave you oblivious to their incisive comments on dialectic materialism and the relationship between Kemalism and Socialism. Nevertheless, when you dine here you're dropping in on a real local scene, especially in winter, when you're confined to the simple but smart interior, decorated with myriad photos, and everything feels intimate and convivial. In summer, Refik's tables join the general, lively eating free-for-all that has now colonised the entirety of Sofyali Sokak, a state of affairs for which Refik's popularity has been largely responsible. If you want to try the *meze* dishes in Refik (or any of its surrounding restaurants) just select them by pointing at them in glass-fronted fridges. So at least the language barrier won't get in the way of your stomach.

Food 7, Service 5, Atmosphere 8

Seasons Restaurant (top)

Four Seasons Hotel,
Tevfikhane Sokak 1, Sultanahmet
Tel: 00 90 212 402 3000
Open: daily, noon–3pm, 7–11pm

European 175TL

One of the finest European restaurants in Istanbul belongs to the Four Seasons in Sultanahmet, an establishment that recently won the rather blandly titled but no doubt prestigious 'best hotel restaurant in Turkey' award. The setting is an elegant conservatory and beautiful courtyard, which errs on the tasteful side of opulence. The menu changes

every season, adapting to the best of what's locally available, but dishes are generally adorned with touches of French finery, Italian classicism and the odd nod to the Far East. Regulars also include dishes such as grilled sea bass, perfectly-seared, while short-term, special regional menus – such as a recent collection of dishes from Turkey's Hatay province – are exceptional. The Sunday brunch is also legendary and should be experienced, if only for a peek at the city's high society. Pricey by Istanbul standards, it's a lavish affair that should set you up for a great siesta. Smart threads and a reservation are a must.

Food 8, Service 9, Atmosphere 7

Sunset Grill & Bar (bottom)

Yol Sokak 1, off Adnan
Saygun Caddesi, Ulus Parki, Ulus
Tel: 00 90 212 287 0357
www.sunsetgrillbar.com

Open: daily, noon–3pm, 7pm–2am

Eclectic 150TL

A touch of California on the Bosphorus, Sunset has been open for more than a decade. The fact that it's still popular with the smart crowd and winning awards confirms its enduring quality. Set in the arboreal surrounding of Ulus Park, on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus, it has a stunning location (though it's a fair taxi ride from wherever you're likely to be), which it makes great use of with its lovely terrace, replete with contemporary, wave-shaped awnings. The food hails from three continents (Europe, Asia and America, melding towards a general fusion), seasoned



eat...



drink

Long before they were Muslims, the Turks were drinkers. Old habits die hard, or in this particular case, not at all. Instead they flourished and grew, helped along by the Ottomans' imaginatively liberal interpretation of religious strictures that have had a rather more sobering effect in many lands further east. Indeed, the hobby of extreme and sustained drinking was given the imperial imprimatur by a catalogue of inebriated sultans, such as Mahmut II, who managed to die of alcohol poisoning in 1839, and the aptly named Selim the Sot, who slipped and cracked his head on a soapy *hamam* floor after downing an entire bottle of Cypriot wine in 1574.

However, the habit wasn't adopted by the more God-fearing masses and consequently Turkey is not the land of one-thousand-and-one drinks, but three: *raki*, beer and wine. *Raki*, the national drink, is made from fermented grapes infused with aniseed and is similar to French *pastis*. Drunk with water or ice (only barbarians take it neat) it is the essential companion to *meze*. Efes is the refreshing, and suspiciously ubiquitous, leading Turkish beer (its marketing manager is clearly a dangerous megalomaniac – on many streets every shop hoarding and canopy is dedicated to Efes). Turkish wine has come on leaps and bounds in the last decade and is now winning awards in blind tastings against French Bordeaux. Large producers include Doluca (which owns the Kav and Villa Doluca vineyards) and Kavaklıdere (which owns the lovely Yakut and lesser Angora, Sade and Dikmem brands). Truly excellent bottles you may wish to hunt down include Doluca's Sarafin Chardonnay and boutique producer Likya's Merlot-Syrah blend. New wine store-cum-bar Sensus near the Galata Tower allows you to sample wines from nearly every single producer in the country and is a great place to start. Imported spirits pay a hefty surcharge that has sadly stunted the growth of a cocktail culture, although this is rapidly changing in the hip bars around Tünel and Beyoğlu.

When it comes to drinking venues, however, Istanbul has an abundance of choice, including some of the most spectacular bars imaginable thanks to the city's wealth of outstanding views and vistas. Geographically, they are concentrated in Beyoğlu and in hotspots along the European Bosphorus shore such as Ortaköy and Kuruçeşme, with few notable options on the Asian side including Hush (which opened in 2010) and a new branch of 360° (which opened in 2011). It's also worth pointing out that many of the places separated here into the Drink, Eat, Party and Snack sections are in fact places where you can do all four (perhaps even all at once).

Around sunset on a summer's day there are few places better than sleekly modern Nu Teras, located on the seventh floor of a block in Pera, perfectly aligned as it is with the setting sun. Stunning panoramic views are also the *raison d'être* for 5-Kat, Leb-i-Derya and Vogue (see Eat), all crisply contemporary and popular with Istanbul's fashionable crowd.



Bars such as Badehane, in Asmalimescit, offer a simpler and more raucous atmosphere, while a string of 20-or so chicer bars line the surrounding streets – a fine place to eat, drink and be merry if ever there was. Meanwhile, the many indistinguishable Galata Bridge bars, though tacky in parts, present beautiful views of the Bosphorus if you're looking in the right direction (away from the bridge), especially at dusk.

For a contrast with all of the above and a hint of Old Stamboul try the elegant K.V., with its tasteful mix of the Viennese and Parisian styles that once gave Pera its dash, or the wonderfully eccentric bar at the fading Büyük Londra Hotel, which combines the varied charms of a caged parrot, Victorian décor, Ottoman chandeliers and slightly incompetent (but bow-tied) staff.

In Sultanahmet the Yesil Ev Garden is a rare, leafy oasis and the perfect place to recuperate after sightseeing. Indeed, the city garden bar has become a new and welcome trend during Istanbul's sub-tropical summers, and Ceyazir and Limonlu Bahçe are great places to sup and recline.

360°*(top)*

*Istiklal Caddesi Mısır Apartmanı,
7th & 8th floors, Beyoğlu
Tel: 00 90 212 251 1042
www.360istanbul.com
Open: daily, 7pm–3am*

Set up by people who clearly felt that Istanbul didn't quite have enough places with fantastic views, 360° occupies a purpose-built floor above a lovely, ornate period building slap-bang in the middle of Istiklal Caddesi. A club/bar/restaurant hybrid, it was once a hangout for the city's super-smart, trendy and glamorous set, who have now been replaced by a more middle-manager, touristy and showy set, but it's still good fun. The view, however, is pretty much timeless and envelopes two continents and several million people making you feel, ahem, on top of the world. There's one caveat, however. Staff members believe that working in a bar – even a cool one like this – gives them the right to sulk and pout their way through an evening service. Not so clever. A sister branch opened in a rooftop spot in Caferaga Mahallesi in Kadiköy in summer 2011.

5 Kat*(middle)*

*Soğanacı Sokak 7, Taksim
Tel: 00 90 212 293 3774
www.5kat.com
Open: daily, 10am–2am*

Owned and run by Turkish actress Yasemin Alkaya, star of independent Turkish movies such as *Woman Smelling a Candle* and *Woman Without a Roof* (the titles lose something in the translation), the fifth-floor bar ('kat' meaning storey)

is decked out with heavy, plush furniture and velvet drapes, all in dark, seductive colours, making it a good, if extremely camp, location for a winter's drink (or bite to eat). In summer – when heavy velvet becomes a little too outré even for 5 Kat regulars (assorted creative types) – the action moves upstairs to the lovely roof terrace, with, needless to say, excellent views of the surrounding city. Even in the sunshine, though, touches of kitsch survive, with a string of those brightly-coloured, swirly, plastic things that you can get in hippy-dippy shops decorating the bar. It's worth hunting down this slightly out-of-the-way street off Siraselviler Caddesi.

Badehane*(bottom)*

*General Yazgan Sokak 5, Tünel
Tel: 00 90 212 249 0550
Open: daily, 9am–2am*

This small, single room just off Sofayalı Sokak is one of the earliest colonisers of the once rough 'n' ready Asmalımescit bar zone and is still one of the best. Originally a haunt of an unwashed collection of liberals and poets, it's a shade more 21st-century now and attracts a nice, happy crowd, mainly in their 20s. Patrons still fall into spontaneous and raucous dancing, however, and backgammon tables remain stacked up on the bar counter. In winter a coal-fired brazier heats up the interior and the atmosphere becomes bookish, romantic and London pub once again. And since Badehane is located in the heart of lively Asmalımescit, you can have plenty of other picks to head to afterwards.



drink...